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DREW FRIEDMAN

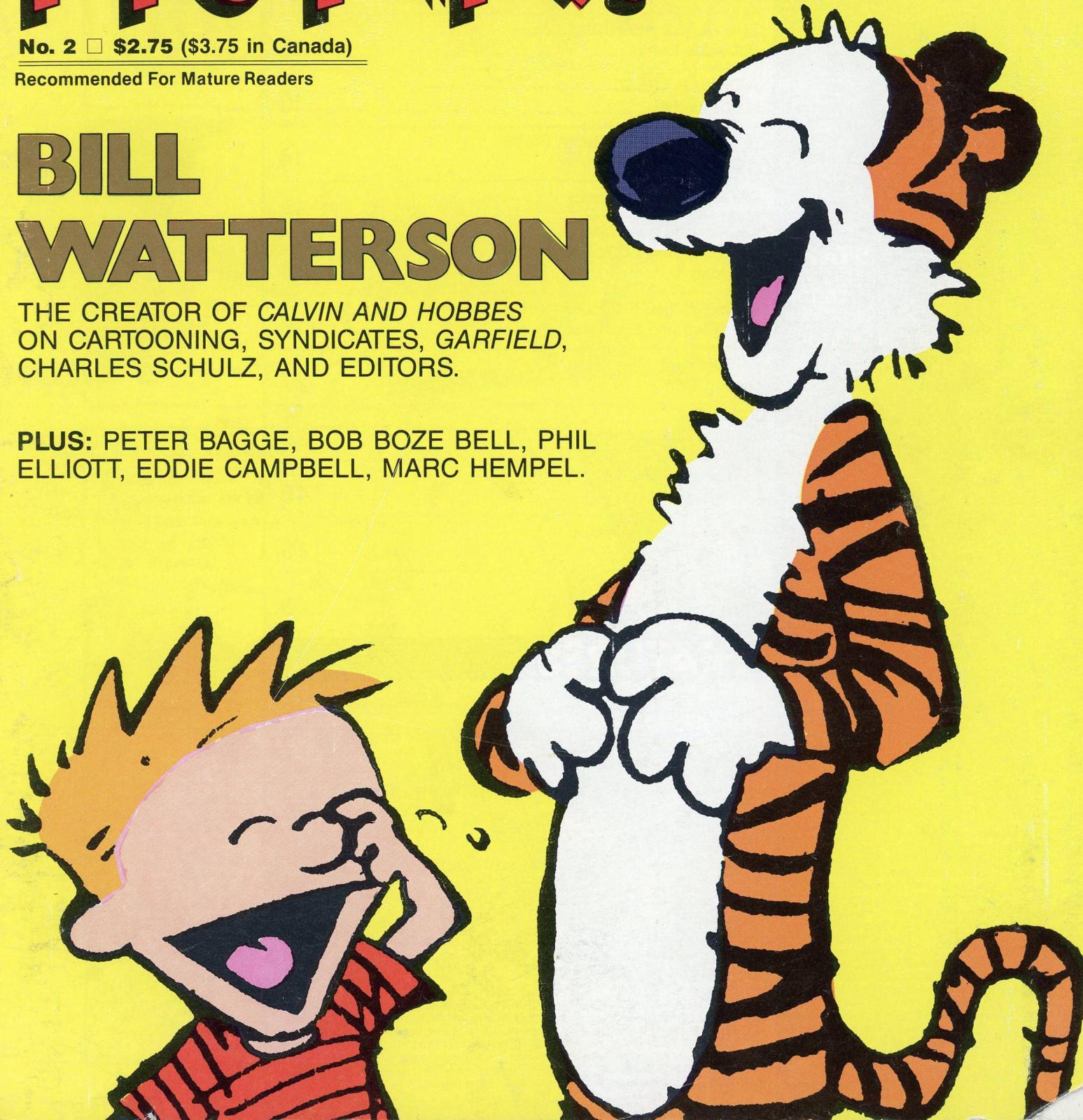
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Recommended For Mature Readers

**BILL
WATTERSON**

THE CREATOR OF CALVIN AND HOBBS
ON CARTOONING, SYNDICATES, GARFIELD,
CHARLES SCHULZ, AND EDITORS.

PLUS: PETER BAGGE, BOB BOZE BELL, PHIL
ELLIOTT, EDDIE CAMPBELL, MARC HEMPEL.



BILL WATTERSON

When Calvin and Hobbes hit the nation's funny pages in late 1985, it took everybody by surprise. A literate comic strip? By a guy who can draw? About a kid who acts like a real kid? And it's funny? And it's from a major syndicate? The cognoscenti of the graphic narrative form thought they'd died and gone to comic strip heaven.

But it's true. Against heavy odds, one man with a lot of determination and a fierce sense of his craft may have single-handedly given the strips a new lease on their artistic life. It's been a struggle, but Bill Watterson, like his creation, is the real thing at last.

ANDREW CHRISTIE: Let's start with the basics: when, where, why, and how?

BILL WATTERSON: Well, I don't know how far back you want to go; I've been interested in cartooning all my life. I read the comics as a kid, and I did cartoons for high school pub-

lications—the newspaper and yearbook and so on. In college, I got interested in political cartooning and did political cartoons every week for four years at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, and majored in political science there.

CHRISTIE: All in Ohio?

WATTERSON: Yes. I grew up in Chagrin Falls, Ohio.

CHRISTIE: What kind of time frame are we talking about?

WATTERSON: I was born in 1958; we moved to Chagrin when I was 6, so from the first grade on, really. My whole childhood was in Chagrin Falls. Right after I graduated from Kenyon, I was offered a job at the *Cincinnati Post* as their editorial cartoonist in a trial six-month arrangement. The agreement was that they could fire me or I could quit with no questions asked if things didn't work out during the first few months. Sure enough, things

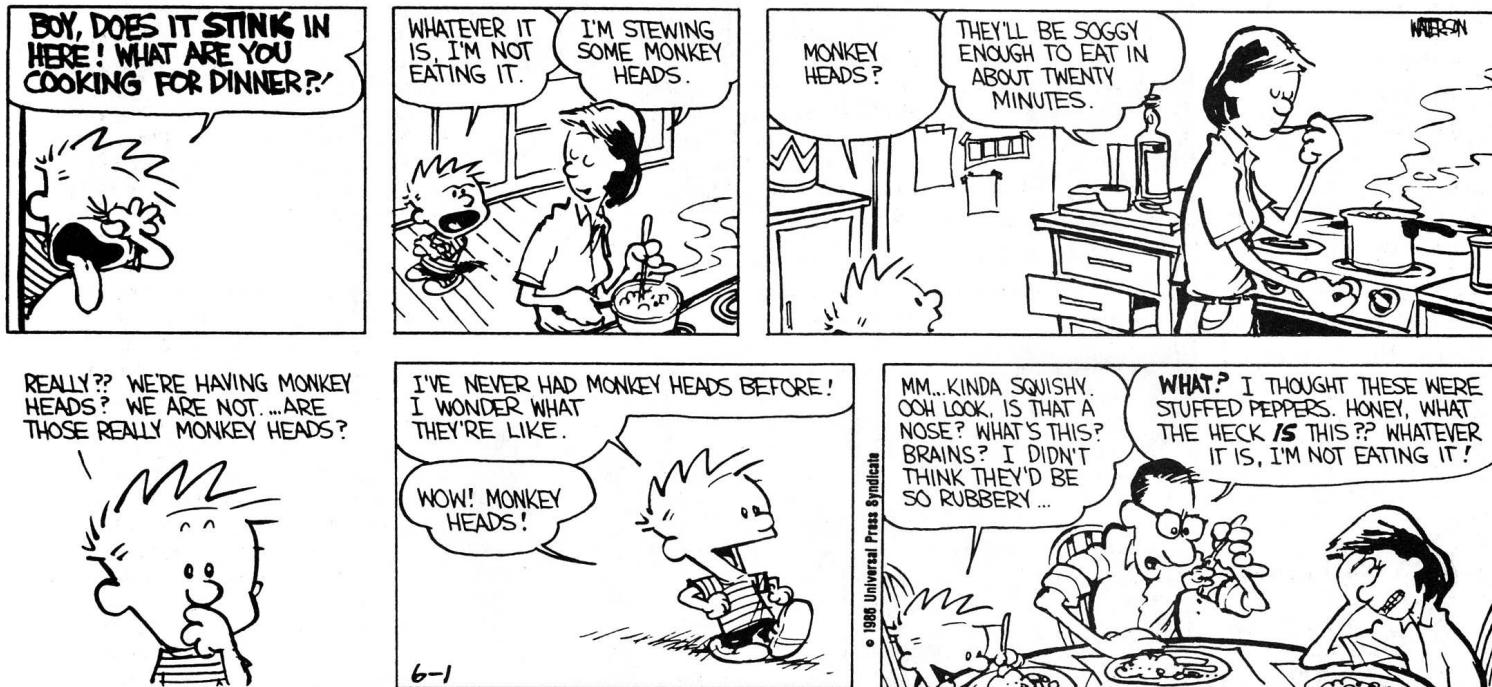
didn't work out, and they fired me, no questions asked.

CHRISTIE: What was the problem?

WATTERSON: To this day, I'm not completely sure. My guess is that the editor wanted his own Jeff MacNelly (a Pulitzer winner at 24), and I didn't live up to his expectations. My Cincinnati days were pretty Kafkaesque. I had lived there all of two weeks, and the editor insisted that most of my work be about local, as opposed to national, issues. Cincinnati has a weird, three-party, city manager-government, and by the time I figured it out, I was standing in the unemployment lines. I didn't hit the ground running. Cincinnati at that time was also beginning to realize it had major cartooning talent in Jim Borgman, at the city's other paper, and I didn't benefit from the comparison.

CHRISTIE: I'm not familiar...

WATTERSON: He's syndicated through King Features, and had been for a couple years by the time I arrived in Cincinnati. This is an odd story. Borgman graduated from Kenyon College the year before I went there, and it was his example that inspired me to pursue political cartooning. He had drawn cartoons at Kenyon, and landed his job at the *Cincinnati Enquirer* right after graduation. His footsteps seemed like good ones to follow, so I cultivated an interest in politics, and Borgman helped me a lot in learning how to construct an editorial cartoon. Neither of us dreamed I'd end up in the same town on the opposite paper. I don't know to what extent the comparison played a role in my editor's not liking my work, but I was very intimidated by working on a major city paper and I didn't feel free to experiment, really, or to travel down my own path. I very early caught on that the editor had something specific in mind that he was looking for, and I tried to accommodate him in order to get published. His idea was that he was going to publish only my very best work so that I wouldn't embarrass the newspaper while I learned the ropes. As sound as that idea may be from the management standpoint, it was disastrous for me because I was only getting a couple cartoons



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a week printed. I would turn out rough idea after rough idea, and he would veto eighty percent of them. As a result I lost all my self-confidence, and his intervention was really unhealthy, I think, as far as letting me experiment, and make mistakes, and become a stronger cartoonist for it. Obviously, if he wanted a more experienced cartoonist, he shouldn't have hired a kid just out of college. I pretty much prostituted myself for six months but I couldn't please him, so he sent me packing.

CHRISTIE: Well, it was mercifully brief, then. **WATTERSON:** Yeah, in a way it was; and actually, I think the experience—now, in hindsight—was probably a good thing. It forced me to consider how interested I was in political cartooning. After I was fired, I applied to other papers but political cartooning, like all cartooning, is a very tough field to break into. Newspapers are very reluctant to hire their own cartoonists when they can get Olliphant or MacNelly through syndication for a twentieth of the price.

So I wasn't having any luck getting accepted anyway and it forced me to re-examine what it was I really wanted to do. In my experience in political cartooning, I was never one of those people who reads the headlines and foams at the mouth with a rabid opinion that I've just got to get down on paper. I'm interested in the issues but . . . I don't know. . . . I guess I just don't have the killer instinct that I think makes a great political cartoonist. I'd always enjoyed the comics more, and felt that as long as I was unemployed it would be a good chance to pursue that and see what response I could get from a syndicate, as I didn't have anything to lose at that point. So I drew up a comic strip—this was in 1980—and sent it off and got rejected. I continued that for five years with different comic strip examples 'till finally *Calvin and Hobbes* came together. But it's been a long road.

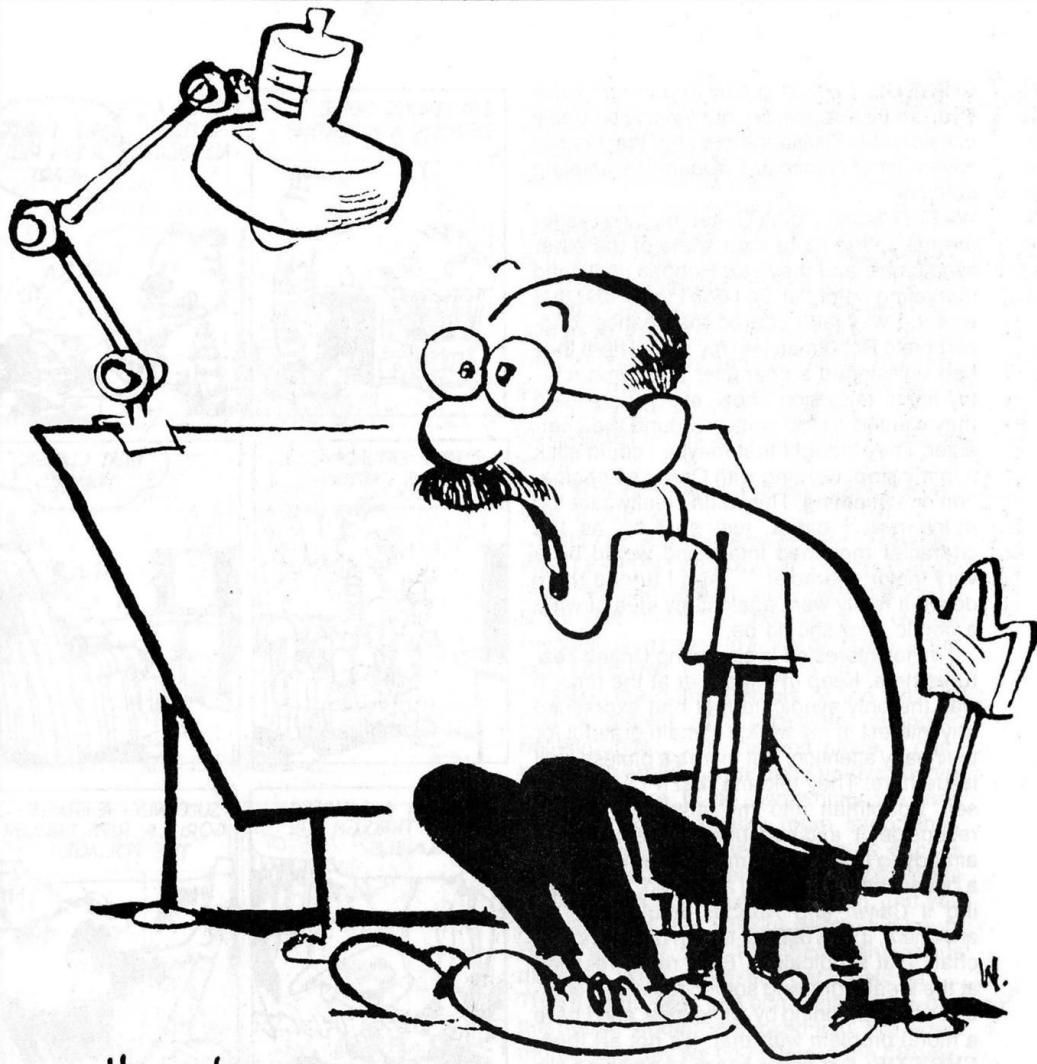
CHRISTIE: Were you submitting different strips to different syndicates, or did you go after one syndicate?

WATTERSON: I didn't know a lot then—and don't know a lot now—as to what the best way to do this is, but my procedure was I would draw up the submission—a month's worth of strips, made to look as professional as I could, and send copies to the five major syndicates, and then just sit around and wait for their rejection letters. I would then try to see if I could second-guess them or imagine what they were looking for that I could put in my next submission and gradually get a more marketable comic strip. In hindsight, as I say, I'm not convinced that that's the best way to go about it. Trying to please the syndicates was pretty much the same as what I had ended up doing at the *Cincinnati Post*, and I don't think that's the way to draw your best material. You should stick to what you're interested in and what you feel comfortable with, what you enjoy, what you find funny—that's the humor that will be the strongest, and that will transmit itself. Rather than trying to find out what the latest trend is, you should draw what is personally interesting.

CHRISTIE: So after five years you just quit doing what you'd been doing and did what you wanted to do?

WATTERSON: It was a slow process, and actually what happened is another odd coincidence. One of the strips I'd sent had Calvin and Hobbes as minor characters. Calvin was

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How It's Done — the fascinating process revealed!

the little brother of the strip's main character, and Hobbes was like he is now, a stuffed tiger that came to life in Calvin's imagination. One of the syndicates suggested that these two characters were the strongest and why didn't I develop a strip around them? I had thought they were the funniest characters myself, but I was unsure as to whether they could hold their own strip. I was afraid that maybe the key to their wackiness was the contrast between them and the more normal characters in the rest of the strip. I wasn't sure Calvin and Hobbes would be able to maintain that intensity on their own. But I tried it, and almost immediately it clicked in my mind; it became much easier to write material. Their personalities expanded easily, and that takes a good 75 percent of the work out of it. If you have the personalities down, you understand them and identify with them; you can stick them in any situation and have a pretty good idea of how they're going to respond. Then it's just a matter of sanding and polishing up the jokes. But if you've got more ambiguous characters or stock stereotypes, the plastic comes through and they don't work as well. These two characters clicked for me almost immediately and I feel very comfortable working with them.

That syndicate, oddly enough, declined my strip, so I started sending it around. Universal expressed an interest in it and wanted to see more work, so I drew another month's worth of art, sent that to them, and they decided to take it.

CHRISTIE: That's rather ironic: The syndicate that suggested you bring out those two characters rejected the strip?

WATTERSON: Yeah.

CHRISTIE: Who was this?

WATTERSON: Well, if you want to rub their noses in it, it was United Features. I was sort of mystified when they rejected the strip. They had given me a development contract, which meant I was to work exclusively with them and rather than completing everything on my own and turning it in to them and having it rejected or accepted, I was working much more directly with the syndicate, turning in smaller batches much more frequently, and getting comments on them. The idea was that they would help me develop the strip and then, assuming that they liked it, it would flow into a normal contract for syndication. I'm not sure exactly what happened; I gather that the sales staff didn't have much enthusiasm for it, I don't know—but apparently they couldn't convince enough people there in high places.

CHRISTIE: I would guess, and I don't know if you share this opinion, but there is probably considerable resistance to a strip that doesn't have a lot of immediate, apparent marketing potential.

WATTERSON: I think United really looks for the marketing more than some of the other syndicates, and they saw Hobbes as having marketing potential, so I don't think that that was it. I was later offered the chance to incorporate Robotman into my strip. There they had envisioned a character as a product—toy lines, television show, everything—and they wanted a strip written around the character. They thought that maybe I could stick it in my strip, working with Calvin's imagination or something. They didn't really care too much how I did it, just so long as the character remained intact and would be a very major character... And I turned them down. It really went against my idea of what a comic strip should be.

I'm not interested in slamming United Features here. Keep in mind that at the time, it was the only syndicate that had expressed any interest in my work. I remain grateful for their early attention. But there's a professional issue here. They told me that if I was to insert Robotman into my strip, they would reconsider it, and because the licensing was already in production, my strip would stand a better chance of being accepted. Not knowing if *Calvin and Hobbes* would ever go anywhere, it was difficult to turn down another chance at syndication. But I really recoiled at the idea of drawing somebody else's character. It's cartooning by committee, and I have a moral problem with that. It's not art then.

CHRISTIE: I've never heard of anything like that before.

WATTERSON: Yeah, well, I think it's really a crass way to go about it—the Saturday morning cartoons do that now, where they develop the toy and then draw the cartoon around it, and the result is the cartoon is a commercial for the toy and the toy is a commercial for the cartoon. The same thing's happening now in comic strips; it's just another way to get the competitive edge. You saturate all the different markets and allow each to advertise the other, and it's the best of all possible worlds. You can see the financial incentive to work that way. I just think it's to the detriment of integrity in comic strip art.

CHRISTIE: It may be good business but it would be unfortunate to see that catch on.

WATTERSON: Yeah, I don't have a lot of respect for that.

CHRISTIE: Well, enough of this depressing stuff; let's talk about Calvin and Hobbes.

WATTERSON: Okay.

CHRISTIE: Is there a Calvin?

WATTERSON: A real one? No.

CHRISTIE: Is he in some way autobiographical?

WATTERSON: Not really. Hobbes might be a little closer to me in terms of personality, with Calvin being more energetic, brash, always looking for life on the edge. He lives entirely in the present, and whatever he can do to make that moment more exciting he'll just let fly... and I'm really not like that at all.

CHRISTIE: You manage a lot of complex shifts between fantasy and reality; between Hobbes

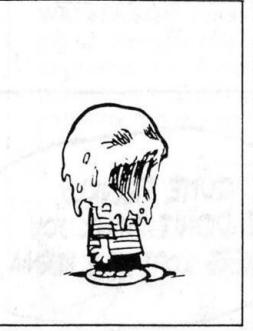
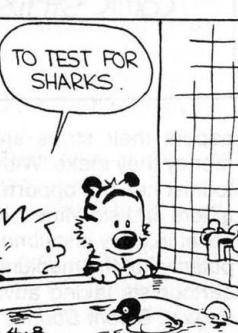


as a stuffed tiger and a real-life playmate. He's frequently involved in what is apparently the real world, doing real things together with Calvin that he couldn't possibly be doing. Do you think that kind of thing out in advance or does it just come to you when the gag calls

for it?

WATTERSON: Could you name something specifically? I'm not sure I follow.

CHRISTIE: Well, when they're driving down the mountain in their wagon and flying all over the place. You think, after reading the first few



strips, that you've got the idea; that this is a stuffed tiger and when he and Calvin are alone he becomes real—to Calvin—but then, obviously, when they're doing things like that in the real world, he has to be more than fantasy.

WATTERSON: Yeah, it's a strange metamor-

phosis. I hate to subject it to too much analysis, but one thing I have fun with is the rarity of things being shown from an adult's perspective. When Hobbes is a stuffed toy in one panel and alive in the next, I'm juxtaposing the "grown-up" version of reality with Calvin's

version, and inviting the reader to decide which is truer. Most of the time, the strip is drawn simply from Calvin's perspective, and Hobbes is as real as anyone. So when Calvin is careening down the hillside, I don't feel compelled to insert reminders that Hobbes is a stuffed toy. I try to get the reader completely swept up into Calvin's world by ignoring adult perspective. Hobbes, therefore, isn't just a cute gimmick. I'm not making the strip revolve around his transformation. The viewpoint of the strip fluctuates, and this allows Hobbes to be a "real" character.

CHRISTIE: *It has a lunatic internal consistency.*

WATTERSON: Yeah, I guess that's the best way of putting it.

CHRISTIE: *Are you familiar with Krazy Kat?*

WATTERSON: Yes! I love it; I wish I thought that that kind of work were possible today.

CHRISTIE: *Well, it sounds like it is. George Herriman didn't need to justify his reality, either.*

WATTERSON: Yeah, I agree on that point. I mean, the completeness of the art, the bizarre dialect, the constantly changing backgrounds... In the first place, I don't know who would put enough energy into their work anymore to do something like that; secondly, and probably more importantly, comic strips are being printed at such a ridiculous size that elimination of dialogue and linework is almost a necessity and you just can't get that kind of depth. I think of *Pogo*, another strip that had tremendous dialogue and fantastic backgrounds... Those strips were just complete worlds that the reader would be sucked into. For a few moments a day we could live in the Okefenokee swamps or in Coconino County; the whole thing was entirely there. The dialogue part of it, the backgrounds were part of it, the characters were off-beat... and you need a little space and time to develop that sort of thing. I know for a fact that nobody's doing it now and I don't know that anybody will do it. Garry Trudeau is the only cartoonist with the clout to get his strip published large enough to accommodate extended dialogue. It's a shame.

CHRISTIE: *Well, let's talk about your peers for a bit.*

WATTERSON: You're gonna get me in trouble.

CHRISTIE: *No, no; you can say anything you want.*

WATTERSON: Yeah, that's what's going to get me into trouble.

CHRISTIE: *What about Gary Larson?*

WATTERSON: I really like the lunacy of *The Far Side*. It's a one-panel strip so it's a slightly different animal than a four-panel strip like mine. I don't really compare one-panel strips to four-panel strips because there are different opportunities with each. Larson's working with one picture and a handful of words, and given that, I think he's one of the most inventive guys in comics. The four-panel strip has more potential for storyline and character involvement than just a single panel. But I do enjoy his stuff a lot.

CHRISTIE: *What about Jim Davis?*

WATTERSON: Uh... *Garfield* is... (long pause)... consistent.

CHRISTIE: *Ooo-kay...*

WATTERSON: U.S. Acres I think is an abomination.

CHRISTIE: Never seen it.

WATTERSON: Lucky you. Jim Davis has his factory in Indiana cranking out this strip about a pig on a farm. I find it an insult to the intelligence, though it's very successful.

CHRISTIE: Most insults to the intelligence are. Well, how about the old school, are they holding up their end at all? Johnny Hart, Charles Schulz...?

WATTERSON: That's an interesting question. I have a tremendous amount of respect for *Peanuts*. Every now and then I hear that *Peanuts* isn't as funny as it was or it's gotten old or something like that. I think what's really happened is that Schulz, in *Peanuts*, changed the entire face of comic strips, and everybody has now caught up to him. I don't think he's five years ahead of everybody else like he used to be, so that's taken some of the edge off it. I think it's still a wonderful strip just in terms of solid construction, character development, the fantasy element... Things that we now take for granted—reading the thoughts of an animal for example—there's not a cartoonist who's done anything since 1960 who doesn't owe Schulz a tremendous debt.

Johnny Hart; I admire the simplicity, the way he's gotten that strip down to the bare essentials; there's nothing at all extraneous in the drawing, and the humor is very spartan. It doesn't grab me, though, because I look for real involvement with characters, and the characters in *B.C.* are pretty much interchangeable; they're props for the humor. I think his style of humor is mostly in the words, not in the characters. I look to strips like *Peanuts*, where you're really involved with the characters, you feel that you know them. I guess that's why I don't enjoy *B.C.* quite as much. It's better than many, though.

CHRISTIE: A lot of golf jokes.

WATTERSON: Yeah, yeah. I don't know, it's hard to knock a strip that bangs out a solid joke every day, but I'd like to think more comic strips could be pushing the boundaries. A lot of comic characters are flat and predictable, and a lot of jokes are no more than stupid puns. For most readers, sure, that passes the mustard, but it certainly doesn't take full advantage of a remarkably versatile medium. I'd like to see cartoonists measuring their work by higher standards than how many

Critters, an early strip about the animal kingdom.

YOU'VE GOT NO SENSE OF ROMANCE, BUFORD.
DO YOU REALIZE YOU'VE BROUGHT ME
FLOWERS ONLY ONCE IN YOUR WHOLE
MISERABLE LIFE?



QUITE FRANKLY,
I DIDN'T THINK YOU
WERE WORTH THE HERNIA...



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Comic strips should be treated as a serious art form, argues Watterson.

papers their strips are in and how much money they make. With four panels, the cartoonist has the opportunity to develop characters and storylines. It can be like writing a novel in daily installments. That's where the potential of the medium is, and I see very few cartoonists taking advantage of it. *Peanuts* does it. *Bloom County*, *Doonesbury*, and *For Better Or For Worse* and others, and that's more or less it. These strips have heart, and an involvement with the characters, so that they're more than just props to relate a gag. We read about them and sort of go through life with them. I think that's taking the strip to a deeper and more significant level. The strips I admire go farther than a gag a day, and take us into a special world.

CHRISTIE: Would it be accurate to call Charles Schulz the major influence on you?

WATTERSON: Oh yeah. As a child, especially, *Peanuts* and *Pogo* were my two biggest influences.

CHRISTIE: Did you ever see any of Percy

Crosby's Skippy?

WATTERSON: No, never did.

CHRISTIE: There are some interesting similarities.

WATTERSON: I've had a couple of people write in comparing my work to *Barnaby* by Crockett Johnson, and that's another strip I've never seen. Or rather, with both of those I think I've seen one or two strips in anthologies, but I've never seen the work at any length.

CHRISTIE: I believe Dover is reprinting two books worth of *Barnaby* in the next few months. That would be worth your picking up. Also *Harold and the Magic Crayon*.

WATTERSON: I remember that. The drawings don't interest me a great deal, but I should look it up just to see what the fuss is about.

CHRISTIE: Do you see yourself doing this forever?

WATTERSON: I'd like to, yeah, if the market will bear it.

CHRISTIE: Calvin and Hobbes, exclusively?
WATTERSON: Yeah, I'm really enjoying the work. I feel that the characters have a lot of potential. I'd like to have the opportunity to draw this strip for years and see where it goes. It's sort of a scary thing now to imagine; these cartoonists who've been drawing a strip for twenty years. I can't imagine coming up with that much material. If I just take it day by day, though, it's a lot of fun, and I do think I have a long way to go before I've exhausted the possibilities.

CHRISTIE: Do you think you'll ever need a ghost?

WATTERSON: No, that's against what I believe about comic strips. In fact, I'd go even further and say I don't think a strip should ever be continued after the death or retirement of a cartoonist.

CHRISTIE: Well, you know, a lot of the very good ones used assistants.

WATTERSON: Yeah, *Pogo* did. Schulz has a good comment on that: "It's like Arnold Palmer having someone to hit his chip shots."

I spent five years trying to get this stupid job and now that I have it I'm not going to hire it out to somebody else. The whole pleasure for me is having the opportunity to do a comic strip for a living, and now that I've finally got that I'm not going to give it away. It also gives me complete creative control. Any time somebody else has their hand in the ink it's changing the product, and I enjoy the responsibility for this product. I'm willing to take the blame if the strip goes down the drain, and I want the credit if it succeeds. So long as it has my name on it, I want it to be mine. I don't know, if you don't have that kind of investment in it... I guess that's the difference between looking at it as an art and looking at it as a job. I'm not interested in setting up an assembly line to produce this thing more efficiently. There are certainly people who could letter the strip better than I do; I don't enjoy lettering very much, but that's the way I write and that belongs in the strip because the strip is a reflection of me. If cartoonists would look at this more as an art than as a part time job or a get-rich-quick scheme, I think comics overall would be better. I think there's a tremendous potential to be tapped.

CHRISTIE: Speaking of creative control, do you ever have a problem with an editor or the syndicate sending a strip back and saying you're using big words, or you're getting political...?

WATTERSON: Universal is really good about that. I send in roughs to the syndicate, which they okay or veto. If the rough is okayed, I ink it up. I understand this arrangement will continue for the first year or two while I get on my feet. Unlike the other places I've worked, though, Universal seems to have some basic respect for what I'm trying to do. Sometimes they'll axe a strip idea I kind of liked—that's inevitable when you judge something as subjective as humor—but they're not altering things, or telling me what to do instead. Either a joke is okay as I have it, or it's rejected, and I've never argued about a decision yet. At the other syndicate, I'd hear, "this is funny, but it's too wordy," or "simplify the drawings." That's interfering with the craft. And if you give a little credit to the concept



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A 1980 editorial cartoon from the *Cincinnati Post*, back in the days when Jimmy Carter wasn't popular with anyone.

of the artist, I think you ought to indulge excesses a bit, because that reflects the personality of the writer. Now if a joke is in bad taste or it's not funny, okay, that's a whole different thing, but how you craft a joke is really what the writer's job is, and I don't think that technique should be subject to any editorial constraints, and Universal has been tremendous about that.

CHRISTIE: So you actually have to draw up more than seven strips a week?

WATTERSON: Yeah...unless they're all really great.

CHRISTIE: How much time do you put in?

WATTERSON: I've never really measured it out. Obviously the great thing about this job is the complete freedom of the schedule. So long as I meet the deadline, they don't care when I work or how I work. Sometimes I work all day if I'm under a crunch; I take a day off here and there if I have something else pressing or if I'm just tired of what I'm doing... so I don't know, I've never sat down to quantify how many hours I actually spend on the strip. I use the deadlines to estimate my progress; each month I know that I have to produce so many strips, and by the end of the month I'll make sure that I have.

CHRISTIE: When you sit down at the drawing table, though, do you do one at a time or just keep going?

WATTERSON: I write separately from the inking up. I'm sure this varies from cartoonist to cartoonist; I find that the writing is the hard part and the drawing is the fun part. I like to separate the two so I can give my full attention to one or the other. Writing it, I'll sit down and stare into space for an hour and sometimes not come up with a single decent idea, or sometimes no idea at all, and it's very tempting to go do something else or just draw up a strip, but I find that if I make myself stick to it for another hour I can sometimes come up with several good ideas. And when I get to the drawing, I really enjoy taking a big chunk of time and working on the drawing and nothing else. That allows me to make sure that I'm really challenging the art, making each picture as interesting as I can... stick in a close-up or an odd perspective. This way, the writing doesn't distract me while I'm drawing and vice versa. I can devote my full attention to each.

CHRISTIE: Is that original artwork available to your admirers? Say, people who interview you for prestigious national magazines?

WATTERSON: No, I've decided not to sell or give any of it out. Don't feel slighted.

CHRISTIE: No, no. I would only make such a request because in my opinion, and in the opinion of just about everybody I know, what you're doing is the best stuff in the papers.

WATTERSON: Thank you very much; it's gratifying to hear that from people who care about comic art. I never know what to make of it when someone writes to say, "Calvin and Hobbes is the best strip in the paper. I like it even more than *Nancy*." Ugh.

CHRISTIE: That's Andy Warhol's favorite strip.

WATTERSON: Oh, well, that would figure. Maybe he's the nut writing me.

